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Linguistic and sociolinguistic awareness towards Japanese honorifics and politeness strategies of Polish students of Japanese studies

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to evaluate the linguistic and communicative competences regarding the use of Japanese honorifics among young language learners of Japanese studies in Poland. The attitude of Polish students towards the category of *keigo* – its diversification and significant role as a communicative strategy, especially from the perspective of implementing Japanese language in future social and professional life situations – is considered here an important component of the present research.

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The main method for this investigation has been the analysis of a questionnaire conducted in the Department of Japanese and Chinese Studies of Jagiellonian University among the participants of different years of study in order to determine the level of their knowledge and ability to use Japanese language on different levels of politeness and casualness. The study also includes a brief assessment of the students' motivations and attitudes towards acquiring and developing communicative skills in regard to Japanese politeness.

The impact of the native language, which may be regarded as an obstacle to using foreign language for communicative purposes naturally and efficiently, has also been taken into account. Moreover, the selection of teaching materials as well as the role of Japanese language teachers, whose teaching strategies and engagement in developing the communicative competences of students influence learning processes, will be also mentioned in order to determine the extent of significant external motivations influencing the learning processes of foreign students.

Keywords: Japanese language education, language errors, honorifics, communicative competence, language awareness

1. Introduction

Politeness (*keigo* 敬語, lit. 'respectful language; language of reverence') is a grammatical category of Japanese language. Therefore, it is considered a significant linguistic property which is reflected not only in the use of adequate lexical means, but also in the deeper structural layers of Japanese grammar. Hasegawa (2014: 255) notes that "when polite expressions are systematized and incorporated into the grammar of a language they are termed honorifics". In his book dedicated to Japanese honorifics, Kikuchi (1994) underlines that the major function of *keigo* is to serve its users in their social life and that some individual and contextual factors influence the choice to use *keigo* or not (Kikuchi 1994 as cited in Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith 2016: 142). Concerning Polish research on contemporary Japanese, Huszcza (1980: 175) introduces the term of *honoryfikatywność* ('honorificity') in order to define the specific type of communication between the sender and the receiver of the text which informs about their mutual sociable and social relations. Although

honorifics comprise a fundamental component of Japanese communication, the education and acquisition of polite forms by native Japanese speakers begin relatively late. Jabłoński, with reference to Ogino (1997), states that *keigo* is gradually acquired by the Japanese in their twenties after graduating from school and starting work, and that in every communicative society honorifics are indicators of maturity and readiness to fulfill social roles (2013: 174).

From the perspective of Japanese culture and society, human relationships (*ningen kankei* 人間関係) are frequently underlined as an important issue. As it seems, it is hardly ever the case that one discusses the family relations, work and education or various other aspects of social life of the Japanese without referring to Japanese politeness. For instance, the common tendency to add name-following suffixes such as *-san* ‘Mr/Mrs/Miss’, *-chan* (suffix for familiar person) or *-kun* ‘my junior; my younger colleague’ while speaking or referring to the person indicates that politeness is, more or less, reflected in the every-day language behaviors of the Japanese.

Taking into account this brief introduction of Japanese *keigo*, one can easily come to a conclusion that foreign learners of Japanese language should be expected to put significant emphasis on developing their knowledge and curiosity towards Japanese honorifics.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of Japanese studies in Poland, this aspect of Japanese linguistics is generally explored and exercised rather passively, by acquiring a theoretical base and exercising the most common patterns of *keigo*. According to the traditional categorization, *keigo* is divided into three categories (Kikuchi 2010: 30–31): two of them: *sonkeigo* 尊敬語 lit. ‘honorific language; deferential language’, and *kenjōgo* 謙讓語 lit. ‘humble language’, are used to express and emphasize the position and mutual relation between speaker and listener or referent, while the last one, *teineigo* 丁寧語 lit. ‘addressative forms; polite language, courteous language’, or the so-called “*desu/-masu* forms”, is regarded as a polite, but hierarchically neutral way of speaking. In most of the cases, however, learners of Japanese as a second language, especially those who have not visited Japan yet, prefer to skip the more complex *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo*

patterns of politeness. Instead, they only use the *teineigo* forms, as they appear more familiar, less complex and less error-conducive¹. This tendency is determined by the fact that from the beginning of Japanese language courses for foreigners, the focus is primarily placed on acquiring the competences of *teineigo* in its standardized version (as of *hyōjungo* 標準語 ‘standard Japanese’). Consequently, aspects of Japanese language competence such as casual language, the dichotomy of honorific/humble, or dialectal varieties of contemporary Japanese are considered secondary, or in other words, as the set of linguistics skills which students are expected to acquire naturally through their individual experience among Japanese native speakers. To put it yet differently, the multiple registers and varieties of Japanese language are considered less important in the process of Japanese language teaching, especially during the bachelor course.

In the workbooks dedicated to the first- and second-year students of Japanese studies, such as *Shokyū Nihongo* 初級日本語 (Tōkyō Gai-kokugo Daigaku Ryūgakusei Kyōiku Sentā 2010) or *Nyū Apurōchi* ニューアプローチ (Ogino 2003), *keigo* is briefly mentioned in the form of a few exercises, which focus mainly on the opposition between the pairs of deferential and humble analytic forms, e.g. *o-kaki ni naru* お書きになる ‘kindly write’ vs. *o-kaki suru* お書きする ‘humbly write’, deferential and humble verbs, e.g. *meshiagaru* 召し上がる ‘kindly eat’ vs. *itadaku* いただく ‘humbly eat’, as well as on the use of honorificatively modified benefactive verbs, e.g. *itadaku* いただく ‘humbly receive’ vs. *kudasaru* くださる ‘kindly offer’ vs. *sashiageru* 差し上げる ‘humbly offer’. Although the basics of Japanese honorifics are supposedly covered during the lectures on the descriptive grammar of Japanese language, a more practical approach is also required for students to further their competence in the honorific aspects of the Japanese language use.

¹ In recent years, Japanese Ministry of Education promulgated a new five-category division of *keigo* (*sonkeigo*, *kenjōgo*, *teichōgo* ‘formal polite speech’, *teineigo* and *bikago* ‘refined speech’). More about various ways of categorizing *keigo* in, *inter alia*, Barešowa 2015.

2. Aim and methodology of the paper

The main purpose of this research has been to define the level of motivation and interest of Polish students of Japanese studies in acquiring various aspects of *keigo*, as well as to investigate their linguistic and contextual knowledge and the potential ability to use the Japanese language on different levels of politeness and casualness. The possible errors and misunderstandings occurring in the use of Japanese honorifics for communicative purposes have also been taken into account.

The opinions of students introduced in this paper are also regarded as a useful tool in determining the significance of additional factors, such as the role of native language, in the process of *keigo* acquisition, as well as the selection of teaching methods and teaching materials by language teachers.

The research presented in this paper was conducted primarily in the form of survey analysis. The survey was carried out in May and June 2018 among the participants of all study years (three years of the bachelor course and two years of the master course) of the Japanese studies at the Department of Japanese and Chinese Studies of Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland.

The survey participants were asked to:

1. evaluate their basic knowledge, attitude and intuition towards the *keigo* category (Figure 1);
2. reveal their awareness of individual language errors in the spontaneous use of *keigo* (Figure 2);
3. present their communicative competences and the general capability in the Japanese polite register (Figure 3).

The number of the respondents was 73, which comprised about 75% of all eligible students. The participants were both male and female, aged between 19 and 26 years old. The questionnaire contained four multiple choice questions, with the possibility to add comments or notes below each of the question. The respondents were instructed that the present

research was anonymous and voluntary, and encouraged to write their personal comments and additional remarks.

All Japanese examples and quotations have been translated into English by the author of this paper.

3. Analysis of the results

3.1. The evaluation of the basic knowledge, attitude and communicative intuition towards the *keigo* category

Language awareness and intuition are considered as two important aspects of foreign language learning. According to Sanada *et al.* (1992: 114–116), there are five major domains of language awareness: “(I) Evaluation and perception of the language or language behavior; (II) Recognition of the actual state of the language or language behavior; (III) Intentional awareness of the language or language behavior; (IV) Conviction and expectation toward the language or language behavior; (V) Standards of the language or language behavior”. Apparently, properties such as operational memory, grammatical correctness and speech fluency are significant, but might be insufficient in the process of foreign language learning on the advanced or professional level. What seems to be of equal importance is a general knowledge of a given linguistic reality and an ease of navigation within its frameworks, an awareness of its diversity, complexity and ambiguity, and consequently, the ability to pass accurate judgments about one’s language use.

The respondents of the survey were asked to analyze suggested statements about Japanese politeness and define whether, in their view, these opinions are correct (answer *yes*), incorrect (answer *no*), or the right answer is unknown to them/the statement seems too confusing to evaluate (skip the question). The list of the ten (I–X) suggested statements below

is accompanied by the presentation of students' answers in the simple graph (Figure 1).

- I. *Teineigo* 'polite language; addressative forms' is one of the sub-categories of *keigo*.
- II. Honorifics in Japanese constitute a grammatical category.
- III. *Keigo* is rooted in Japanese tradition and consequently, is stable and unchangeable.
- IV. In every-day communication, *teineigo* is used more often than *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo* forms.
- V. *Keigo* proficiency is an important skill required to find a good job in Japanese company.
- VI. The first conversation with new Japanese acquaintances, regardless of their age, gender or status, should be held in *keigo*.
- VII. During informal events, e.g. lunch with the boss, skipping *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo* and occasionally using less polite forms is regarded as a natural and appropriate behavior.
- VIII. Japanese youth tend to skip *keigo* or use it incorrectly and consequently, are said to be responsible for *nihongo-no midare* 'disintegration of the Japanese language'
- IX. *Keigo* is a significant aspect of Japanese language and culture and therefore, the participants of Japanese studies should learn and practice it more during the classes of practical Japanese.
- X. As a foreigner I am not able to understand *keigo* rules and use it fluently anyway, and therefore, there is no need to practice it more during the classes of practical Japanese.

As the figures presented above suggest, students responded by agreeing or disagreeing with the statements, and none of them skipped the questions. Apparently, the opinions of the respondents about various aspects of Japanese honorifics, such as their features and functionality, are rather similar, and the respondents also share reasonably common views and attitudes toward this communicative category. There are five statements that more than 79% of respondents agreed with. Two of them indicate the

knowledge of students: I. *Teineigo* belongs to the *keigo* category (82%); II. *Keigo* is a grammatical category (97%). The next two reveal their attitude towards Japanese honorifics: V. *Keigo* proficiency is important to find a job (89%); IX. *Keigo* is a significant tool of communication and therefore should be practiced more (81%). The response to the final statement of the discussed five was probably based on the sociolinguistic intuition of the students: IV. In every-day Japanese *teineigo* is used more often than *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo*.

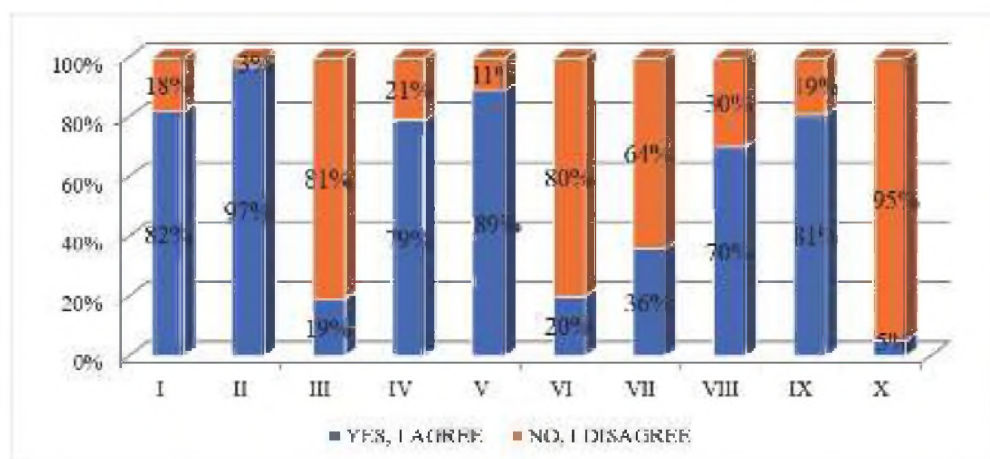


Figure 1. The summary of opinions about *keigo* based on the knowledge, attitude and intuition of Japanese language learners

There are also three statements that most of the students disagreed with (the answer *no* was selected by more than 80% of respondents). Two of them draw from the knowledge of the students: III. *Keigo* is rooted in Japanese tradition and is thus unchangeable (81% for *no*); VI. The first conversation with a Japanese person should be held in polite language (80% for *no*)². The last evaluation reflects the students' attitude: X. Foreigners are unable to understand and use *keigo* correctly (95% for *no*).

² In this author's opinion, the majority of negative answers in this case (which suggests that there is no need to use *keigo* when speaking with new-found acquaintances) might be based on the common misconception that polite language (*keigo*) refers to *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo* categories only, without considering addressative forms

A variety of responses for the statements VII. It is possible to skip *keigo* during an informal meeting with boss (64% for *yes* and 36% for *no*) and VIII. Japanese youth skip *keigo* or use it inappropriately (70% for *yes*, 30% for *no*) demonstrates that the sociological background of the *keigo* use, as well as a general orientation in the current language situation in Japan are relatively problematic issues for learners of Japanese as a second language. It may only be natural for foreign students that although they attempt to develop their linguistic competences and build certain attitudes toward polite expressions, their skills stay more automatic (trained) than intuitive without an advanced contextual awareness³.

3.2 The awareness of individual language errors in the spontaneous use of *keigo*

In the next question, the respondents were asked to indicate the most common language errors or negative speaking habits appearing in their individual spontaneous use of honorifics. They were suggested the following six (I–VI) negative or confusing tendencies and encouraged to propose other possible problems occurring in polite speech (Figure 2).

(*teineigo*) as a component of *keigo*. Students usually associate the word *keigo* with highly polite or humble expressions and *teineigo* with the ordinary Japanese for an every-day use.

³ Additionally, according to the comments of three students of the first year, this question was confusing and difficult to answer. As the respondents suggested, the excessively theoretical explanation and limited number of exercises they were offered during their first year classes, as well as the lack of experience in putting *keigo* skills into practice, turn out insufficient to enable them to give an adequate response to the suggested statements. Moreover, with reference to the statements IX and X, one person claimed that the knowledge of *keigo* helps to assimilate with Japanese people and therefore, honorifics should be considered as an essential part of Japanese language.

- I. I confuse polite structures with benefactive verbs, such as *-te itadaku* ていただく ‘to humbly receive a favor’ and *-te kudasa-ru* てくださる ‘to kindly offer a favor’.
- II. I confuse *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo* forms, e.g. *o-kaki-ni naru* お書きになる ‘to kindly write’ and *o-kaki suru* お書きする ‘to humbly write’, *go-ran-ni naru* ご覧になる ‘to kindly look at’ and *haiken suru* 拝見する ‘to humbly look at’.
- III. I confuse causative-benefactive structures with benefactive structures, e.g. *sasete itadakemasu-ka?* させていただけますか ‘could you kindly allow me to do’ and *shite itadakemasu-ka?* していただけますか ‘could you kindly do’.
- IV. I confuse or skip honorific prefixes such as *go-* and *o-*, e.g. *go-renraku* ご連絡 ‘contact’, *o-henji* お返事 ‘answer’, *go-kakunin* ご確認 ‘confirmation’, *o-sake* お酒 ‘alcohol’.
- V. I overuse addressative forms in regard to appreciative and modest forms which I use less often.
- VI. I generally do not use honorific forms because I am afraid of using them incorrectly.
- VII. Additional comments (e.g. suggestions of other common errors)⁴.

⁴ Additional comments:

1. I usually forget to use *keigo* when speaking in Japanese.
2. My knowledge of *keigo* is too limited to allow for self-monitoring whether I make mistake or not.
3. I have never used *sonkeigo/kenjōgo* in practice.
4. I usually forget to use *keigo* expressions because there is no need to speak very politely in other languages I know.
5. In my opinion, the Japanese honorific system is confusing and irritating.
6. I have a difficulty with assessing whether my utterances in Japanese are impolite or overly polite.
7. I do not confuse *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo* but I unwittingly make errors since I only use *keigo* sporadically.
8. The Japanese honorific system consists of set phrases and therefore, it is difficult to come up with adequate polite expression in spontaneous conversation.

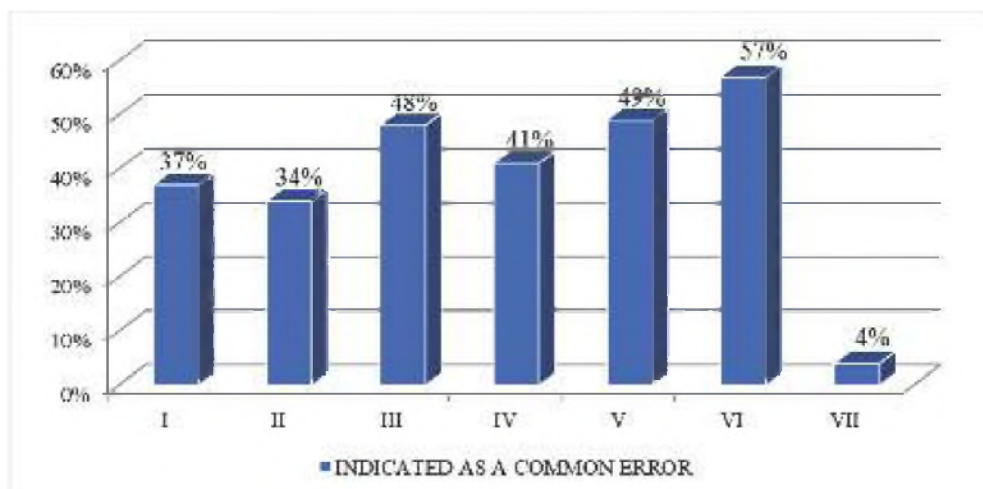


Figure 2. Common language errors and incorrect habits in the spontaneous use of *keigo* made by Polish students of Japanese

The figures presented in the graph, especially for statements V. and VI., as well as the additional comments from the students, indicate that the students tend to refrain from using honorific and humble forms lest they make a mistake, and prefer to only use more familiar and less complex addressative forms. In spoken communication the tendency to select the easier, more familiar and less pragmatically charged structure is a common linguistic behavior. Mahmoud (2014: 276), referring to Richards (1975), claims that simplification – the omission of certain linguistic (grammatical or lexical) elements by language learners – results from the incomplete knowledge of target language:

Simplification or reduction of the language by dropping certain elements is only one consequence of transfer from the native or the target language. It is a result of opting for the maximum amount of learning or communication with the limited number of forms or rules available.

9. I sometimes forget to replace common verbs such as *shiru* 知る ‘to know’ with its deferential (*go-zonji-ni naru* ご存知になる) or humble (*zonjiru* 存じる) variants.

Furthermore, Selinker (1972 as cited by Żurek 2014: 293) classifies the communicative strategy of omitting elements and structures which are presumed by learners as redundant in spontaneous communication as one of the five fossilization processes occurring in second language learning. The presently discussed common tendency to select a simpler and more familiar structure over a more polite and pragmatically adequate one may be regarded as an example of simplification, or paraphrasing, on the communicative level.

Japanese sociolinguists also underline the obstacles that are likely to be encountered by foreign language learners which result from the deficient acquisition of the target language motivated by the insufficiency of sociolinguistic (pragmatic) knowledge of the language:

Aside from above-mentioned difficulties held by native speakers, to foreigners who perform language behavior by using *interlanguage*, additional problems occur and these problems are determined by the insufficient acquisition of the target language. The difficulties are differentiated according to the level of acquisition: from lexical difficulties, e.g. not knowing the word indicating or relating to specific things or phenomena, to the problems with communicative appropriateness, e.g. improper use of polite expressions or gender-differentiated aspects of language use (Sanada *et al.* 1992: 149).

As a language learner attempts to participate in a conversation with a limited number of linguistic tools, the occurrence of difficulties is inevitable. The goal of the communicative strategy, however, is to be communicative and comprehensible and therefore, from this point of view, language correctness or appropriateness appear to be a secondary matter.

Other suggested errors were selected by more than thirty percent of respondents. Thus, Japanese studies participants (48%) admit to often confusing benefactive constructions, especially those proceeded by the causative form *-saseru*, as they seem difficult to comprehend during spontaneous, fast conversation with Japanese natives. This difficulty can be mainly motivated by the fact that there is no *grammaticalized* causativeness in the Polish language. In this case the incorrect use of language is an example of so-called *interlingual errors* (*gengokan erā* 言語間エラー)

which are determined by the interference of the source language (in this case Polish) in the use of target language (Japanese) (Yamauchi 2003: 290).

Japanese language learners also tend to unintentionally skip honorific prefixes (*o-*, *go-*) added to nouns (41%). As the absence of prefixes do not influence the content of the expression, these elements appear to be easily forgotten or skipped⁵.

In the analysis of common mistakes and incorrect tendencies in the use of *keigo* it is necessary to mention the role of teachers and teaching materials. Although the development of language skills, as well as the tendency to make language errors, is determined by the individual conditions and cognitive skills of the learners (Mahmoud 2014: 275–276), teaching strategies, to a certain extent, impact the language skills, especially in the first stage of learning when theoretical explanations dominate over practical use. The tendency to forget or skip honorific or humble indicators and the general lack of confidence when speaking politely in Japanese is determined mostly by the scarcity of exercises that motivate and encourage students to accustom oneself to Japanese honorifics (e.g. role playing, writing official e-mails, listening to conversations held on business level). In other words, according to the survey results and students' commentaries, students' negative attitude towards politeness is primarily determined by the anxiety experienced by the students towards *keigo*. Although the students are expected to acquire these skills automatically in their future working life, the lack of practical exercises may result in creating a barrier that can never be overcome.

⁵ Less than 40% of respondents claimed to confuse benefactive forms that possess the same meaning but different formal realizations (e.g. by the use of different particles), as in *Sensei-ni oshiete itadaku* 先生に教えていただく 'receive an explanation from teacher' vs. *Sensei-wa oshiete kudasaru* 先生は教えてくださる 'teacher x gives an explanation'. Japanese language learners (34%) also admit to facing difficulties in the appropriate use of appreciative and humble structures, e.g. *o-yobi-ni naru* お呼びになる 'to kindly call' and *o-yobi suru* お呼びする 'to humbly call' because of their formal resemblance.

3.3. Communicative competences and the general capability in the Japanese polite register

Speech in every language is socially diversified, which means that depending on the situation (e.g. formal/informal), circumstances and environment (e.g. a lawyer's language: inside the court/outside the court) and the participants of the conversation (their age, status, background, relation with the speaker etc.), the language in use changes. In Japanese sociolinguistic tradition, language varieties are usually called *gengo henshu* 言語変種, but they are also often associated with *dialects* (*hōgen* 方言). For instance, sociolects are often explained as social dialects (*shakai hōgen* 社会方言) (Takamizawa 2004: 171) because they refer to a particular kind of speech which is typical to certain social group or class. Language varieties are also often associated with registers (*isō* 位相) and consequently called *isōgo* 位相語 'register languages' (Okimori 2010: 132–122). Some Japanese sociolinguists, however, clearly distinguish language registers (also known as *gengo shiyōiki* 言語使用域 or *rejisutā* レジスター) from dialects, stating that contrarily to dialects, registers are varieties that are not determined by the individual properties of the speaker, called attributes (*zokusei* 属性), but by the setting of the conversation (*bamen* 場面) (Sanada *et al.* 1992: 35)⁶. Accordingly, to use different registers means that the same speaker can talk about the same subject using different expressions and in a different way based on the particular situation and circumstances he/she is set in during the act of communication (Takamizawa 2004: 172).

⁶ Register とは方言 (dialect) が話し手の属性によって決定される変種であるのに対して、話し手の置かれた場面によって決定される変種のことである。'Register, in contrast to dialect which is a determined by the nature of the speaker, is a variety determined by the setting of a conversation' (Sanada *et al.* 1992: 152).

Although the choice of the language register is decided by the speaker, the society imposes the rules which restrict its selection⁷. As Japanese society requires the use of polite language in specific situations, strictly linguistic competences are significant but insufficient to appropriately adjust the level of politeness to the particular situation. Therefore, it is important that the individual develop essential communicative competences⁸.

In order to account for their awareness of the significant role of context and social background in polite speech, the students were asked to decide whether the suggested communicative situations (I–X) require the use of *keigo* or not. The results are presented in Figure 3.

- I. Boss speaking to the employees in the work place.
- II. Employee speaking to the boss in the work place.
- III. Women in everyday communication with an unrelated person.
- IV. Young people speaking to elderly people.
- V. Children speaking to an unrelated person.
- VI. Children speaking to their relatives in every-day situations.
- VII. Students speaking to their *sempai* ‘superiors’ inside the school.
- VIII. Students speaking to their *sempai* outside the school.
- IX. Students speaking to their professors and lecturers.
- X. Japanese studies participants speaking to older Japanese.

⁷ In other words, the lawyer should use legal language in the court and the teacher should not use obscure words when speaking to the students in the classroom. However, both of them may speak freely when hanging out with friends or family after work.

⁸ The term communicative competence was introduced to linguistics by Dell Hymes in Hymes 1972 and it refers to the combination of linguistic and sociological knowledge of the language users.

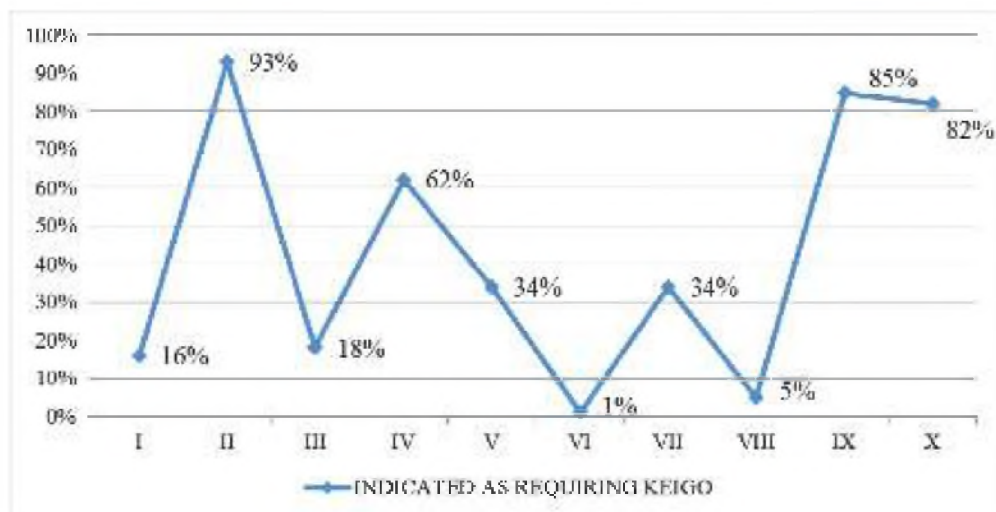


Figure 3. The selection of the communicative situations that require use of *keigo* by Polish students of Japanese studies

According to the graph, three examples were selected by more than 80% of respondents, and therefore seem to have been considered as obviously requiring the use of *keigo*. In students' opinion (93%), employees are obliged to use polite forms when speaking to their bosses in the work place. In the vertical academic environment, the use of polite expression is also deemed necessary; consequently, 85% of students indicated speaking to their professors as situations which require honorifics. Respondents also admitted (82%) that although they are foreigners, as Japanese language learners they should use polite expressions when speaking to older Japanese.

On the other hand, four of the answers were selected in less than 20% of cases, which suggests that, in students' opinion, the use of *keigo* is not a priority matter in the proposed situations⁹. In such cases, students' choices were probably motivated by the following two non-linguistic factors: familiarity between the participants of communication (children

⁹ Especially cases VI. (1%) and VIII. (5%).

speaking to relatives) and a casual, unofficial setting of the conversation (such as outside school in case VIII.)¹⁰.

Students' responses about the statement IV. are particularly interesting. The obligation to use polite expressions by young people speaking to their elders was selected by 62% of the respondents, which, in this author's view, is relatively little. From the Japanese perspective, age is regarded as one of the dominant factors influencing the use of polite expressions. If a young speaker skips *keigo* when speaking to an older person, it is regarded as incorrect and inappropriate. If it is unintentional behavior, it means that the speaker lacks basic social skills and proper upbringing; on the other hand, if it is an intentional omission, it suggests that the speaker purposefully attempts to irritate or offend the listener. Thus, the variation in students' answers amounts to an important admonition to the Japanese language teachers that a greater emphasis should be put on developing communicative competences of their students, including awareness and caution in the use of language in spontaneous settings.

Also, students' suggestions for the situation I. (16%) demonstrate that in their general opinion, superiors are not obliged to use honorifics to their inferiors. Although it can be assumed that the use of polite, less polite or even impolite expressions is motivated by the individual preferences of the speaker, generally the official character and structure of Japanese *shokuba* 職場 'workplace' require, to certain extent, the use of polite patterns of speech and behavior, and consequently a notorious lack of appropriate behavior could be regarded as a clear overuse of someone's position.

¹⁰ In terms of example VIII., however, it can be assumed that had the respondents been the young Japanese, they would give the opposite responses. No matter if the conversation takes place inside or outside the school, Japanese students usually use polite language (*teineigo*) when speaking to their superiors. If they repetitively skip it, they can be regarded as ill-mannered or lacking social skills. The suggestions of the survey respondents were influenced by general attitude between Polish students who basically do not consider older students as their superiors.

4. Conclusion

With reference to the present analysis, it can be concluded that although Japanese studies participants acquire a degree of theoretical knowledge about Japanese politeness, the limited number of practical exercises, as well as the relatively poor contribution of the language instructors in developing sociolinguistic competences of the students, result in students' anxiety about using *keigo* for communication purposes. The results of the survey indicate that Japanese language learners possess a general basic knowledge about Japanese honorifics: students do know how to define and classify *keigo* as a grammatical category, recognize its functions and are able to adjust the level of verbal politeness to particular situations. They are also able to indicate individual errors and negative speaking habits. However, Polish learners of Japanese tend to omit *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo* in spontaneous speech in favor of the more familiar *teineigo* forms rather than risk using the former group incorrectly.

Moreover, Japanese language learners demonstrate a rather negative attitude towards the category of *keigo*, which is motivated by a lack of confidence, anxiety about incorrect or inappropriate language use, as well as the impact of their first language or other familiar languages (such as English for Europeans) which are perceived as less rigid and less complex than Japanese in regard to honorifics. Consequently, the motivation and interest of Japanese language learners in developing *keigo* skills appear considerably low.

This negative attitude towards *keigo* in certain cases is also dictated by the misunderstanding and the overgeneralization of Japanese *jōge kankei* 上下関係 'vertical relations'. In the additional comments, one of the students admitted that what is especially frustrating is the fact that from the Japanese perspective, people with the higher status do not have to use *keigo*, while their inferiors and especially women, in that particular student's words, are expected to be more polite and "elegant". In this regard, it is important to underline that what generally constitutes and determines the use of honorifics is not gender or hierarchical inequalities, but the setting

of the specific conversation, as well as the following set of relationships: between the sender and the receiver of the message, between the sender and the listener who is not a receiver of the message, and also between the sender and the person(s) he/she is referring to (Huszcza 1996: 51). Obviously, *jōge kankei* refers to the situation when “the person of a lower status while speaking to the person of a higher status use appreciative forms when referring to the acts of the partner and humble forms when referring to himself/herself” (Ishiguro 2013: 109); there is no indication, however, that in Japanese society only superiors should be respected while inferiors should not, or that only women should be elegant and eloquent and men can be rude¹¹. Communicative reality is more structuralized, complex, and influenced by various external factors. What also should be taken into account is that social and cultural changes occurring in contemporary Japan determine noticeable transformations of communicative strategies, also pertinent to Japanese honorifics. For instance, one of its results is the existence of positive polite strategies in Japanese communication¹².

Additionally, it is crucial to underline the importance of context and situation in Japanese communication. Kei Ishiguro entitled his sociolinguistic book (Ishiguro 2013) *Nihongo-wa “Kūki”-ga Kimeru* 日本語は「空気」が決める ‘What defines the Japanese language is the *atmosphere*’¹³ in order to emphasize the significance of the mutual attitude between speakers and listeners as an essential component of communication. Accordingly, skipping *teineigo* during the first encounter could be considered impolite

¹¹ In Japanese linguistics, the fictitious speech used to depict typical or stereotypical features of the speaker (such as woman language, man language, gangster language, old-man language etc.) is known under the label of *yakuwarigo* 役割語 ‘role language’ (more in, among others, Kinsui 2014 or Ishiguro 2013: 95–100; see also Gęszczak, this volume).

¹² Inoue (2017: 5) attempts to assuage the fears of language purists by claiming that the changes occurring within Japanese honorifics are not evidence of the disintegration of *keigo* (*keigo-no midare* 敬語の乱れ), but a clear sign of its evolution in progress (*hatten tojō* 発展途上) accompanied by concern and consideration (*hairyo* 配慮) towards the listener.

¹³ In this case, the word *kūki* 空気 ‘air, atmosphere’ refers to the particular situation or mood between participants of the conversation.

behavior, but contrarily, using *teineigo* when having a conversation with close friends could be considered a form of irony, joke or prank.

Needless to say, variation due to external factors is not a characteristic unique to Japanese. Every language works similarly. Therefore, it is crucial for all second language learners to concentrate on developing their linguistic competence, while at the same time always keeping in mind that language and society are mutually connected and interdependent, and that the knowledge and conscious use of different language registers can make their life among native speakers more comfortable and less stressful. In *ibid.*, 100 Ishiguro states that the awareness of *keigo* grows when a native Japanese speaker become a *shakaijin* 社会人 ‘social person; working adult’¹⁴. Japanese studies participants who wish to work at a Japanese company will also have an opportunity to familiarize themselves with *keigo* after graduation. Still, Japanese language teachers in the students’ first language setting are responsible for building solid pragmatic foundations for their students in order to change their general attitude towards *keigo*.

In this regard, the acquisition of honorifics should be regarded as a fundamental component of teaching Japanese for communicative purposes, and a significant tool for preparing students for their future social and working life. What should be thus recommended to Japanese language teachers on an academic level is to focus on increasing the pragmatic competences of their students by familiarizing them with various registers of spoken and written Japanese. Especially, conducting role-playing and listening exercises, as well as practicing trial interviews or business small talks would be of a great value to future Japanologists.

¹⁴ 学生生活を終えて、社会人生活に入る時、敬語というのは強く意識されます。‘After finishing students’ life and entering the life of working [lit. society] adult, the awareness of the honorifics intensifies.’

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